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HIST 303

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WOW!: A Look at The First Two Years of a Program like No Other

Imagine you are a first-time freshman at the one and only Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. Are you excited? Are you nervous? What about? You arrive a whole week early to participate in Week of Welcome. You are kept so busy, with so many different activities both on and off campus, and meeting so many different people. By the time the first day of school comes, you are worn out, but have had one of the best weeks of your life. You feel more prepared, made tons of new friends, and experienced new places.

This sounds exciting to be a part of and I can tell you from experience it is! This very basic description, however, could hold true for the very first-ever Week of Welcome, or this upcoming 60th Week of Welcome, or WOW, for short. WOW has become a monumental favorite tradition for Cal Poly and the surrounding community, but is also known nationally to be one of the largest volunteer college orientation programs in the nation.¹ Freshman Orientation at Cal Poly existed previously, but became WOW officially in 1957. Why begin an official Week of Welcome? What were the original goals? In this paper, I will argue Cal Poly started a week-long orientation tradition that was designed to help new students succeed, rally the campus and community in a common goal, and create a better campus culture.

¹ Nate Alcorn, "Off to the Best Start," *Cal Poly Magazine*, September 2016.

Historiography

A week-long orientation was getting more popular every year in the 1950s and '60s. Although some universities had orientation sessions lasting for 2 days, and others for 11, the average length was 5 days. In the 1920s, US college orientation programs were focused on the immediate needs of freshmen. Hawkes and Johns argued in 1929 that the problem with orientation is the separation between problems in the classroom and outside the classroom. Overall, they define orientation very liberally and talk about orientation in every aspect of life. The main purpose of orientation they would say is for the college freshman to guide him/herself to the job that will make them the happiest, healthiest, and ultimately wealthiest person they can be.² By the 1950s, when Cal Poly's program began, the goals shifted and the philosophy of orientation came into play. Activities became classified as informational, social, or intellectual. Drake argued in 1966 in his review of the literature that intellectual preparation is the most important, but is hard to achieve and may never be fully achieved.³

This topic has been researched locally too. In 2014 Sarah LeDuff argued that Cal Poly's community-building and student-connected Week of Welcome program has developed and changed over the years due to influence from students, administration, and the San Luis Obispo community, while still holding true to its unique traditions.⁴ Although LeDuff tackled the change

² Ernest Hawkes and Ralph Leslie Johns, *Orientation for College Freshmen*, New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1929.

³ Raymond Drake W. Jr., Ft. Collins. Colorado State Univ., and Washington, DC. American Coll. Personnel Association, *Review of the Literature for Freshman Orientation Practices in the U.S.* (Fort Collins: Colorado State University 1966)

⁴ Sarah LeDuff, "WOW! What a Program: The Evolution of Orientation Programs at Cal Poly in Relation to National Trends in Orienting Students" Senior Project, California Polytechnic State University, 2014.

over time of over six decades, my more limited time period will allow for an analytical, in-depth discussion.

In 1956, before the establishment of WOW, orientation was largely social, with lots of free time and some information. In fact, Chuck Cummings, the Student Orientation Chairman that year promised time to “relax and get acquainted with classmates.”⁵ The published schedule was straight forward and open.⁶ Much of the responsibility to inform and support freshmen students, however, appears to land on the Dormitory Manager, or what we might know today as the Resident Advisor (RA). This person was there to deal with problems, advise and talk with the freshmen.⁷ One person, for over 100 students! The good news, is that after 1957, this kind of orientation at Cal Poly was completely unheard of. Orientation from then on would be filled to the brim with activities and information, keeping freshmen busy, but most of all, supported. Freshmen would be grouped into small groups, or “WOW clubs,” and have an upper classman leader to advise and talk with them, which ensured a more personal and beneficial orientation experience.

Cal Poly created a unique orientation program in 1957 in careful consideration of three other orientation programs including: UCLA, Whittier College, and East Los Angeles Junior college.⁸ Cal Poly effectively incorporated the “extensive and changing” aspect of UCLA’s orientation by planning meetings, tours, entertainment, rallies, a football game, dances, and groups of 20. Cal Poly chose not to incorporate the semester-long aspect of it, however. I would explain this by the general assumption of how early Cal Poly considered the students Mustangs

⁵ “Multiple Events Planned to Acquaint Freshmen” *El Mustang* (September 18, 1956)

⁶ “Orientation Schedule” *El Mustang* (September 18, 1956)

⁷ Larry Litchfield, “Dormitory Manager Aids Frosh,” *El Mustang*, (September 18, 1956)

⁸ Curtis, James E. “Orientation of New Students” Welcome Week Guide. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

and the extensive focus on creating such an amazing and busy Week. With the creation of WOW, individuals involved agreed that students became Mustangs as soon as they received their acceptance letter.⁹ The WOW Committee liked the “full and worthwhile orientation program” of Whittier College mostly because of the discussion groups and tradition of the “Bury the Hatchet Party.”¹⁰ Cal Poly somewhat effectively incorporated these aspects. I would argue that the WOW clubs were a bit too big for very meaningful discussion, and in practice, not terribly effective due to poor attendance. Intramural sports were perhaps the closest to the Whittier College, but were unfortunately plagued by poor organization and attendance both years. Perhaps the most interesting schedule the Committee looked at was from East LA Junior College. This describes the response of the Committee and the creation of WOW to the return of women on campus since the schedule was for women. It was mostly structured as a question and answer time about clubs, which Cal Poly liked, because it eliminated the necessity of a representative from every club. This shows Cal Poly’s apprehension about welcoming women to campus. Perhaps WOW replicated some aspects in the required 5-hour long women’s meeting, which we unfortunately do not have minutes from. The first two years of WOW suffered a large loss in this club aspect, however, and individuals recognized this in the Summary.¹¹

Help Students Succeed

In addition to this structural change in the program, 1957 orientation came from focused, intentional planning. In this comprehensive planning, the committee stated the new orientation program’s intentions and objectives. I will argue these were first and foremost focused on

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

student success academically and personally. WOW prioritized student success in practical, wide ways by addressing individual departments, campus culture, academic rigor, and resources.

The Orientation program aimed to first inform students of Cal Poly's educational offerings, philosophy, facilities and personnel. More specifically, they aimed to acquaint new students with courses offered, especially within each student's vocational division and department. By planning departmental meetings with deans and advisors, WOW wanted "to assist each new student in setting his educational objectives together with an awareness of the means at his disposal in reaching them."¹² This aspect of Cal Poly orientation was new, and required more participation from faculty and staff all over campus by advising and holding meetings. More generally, WOW intended to assist in freshmen's transition from high school "attitudes, emphases and methods" to college objectives and help to get them there.¹³ In this way, Cal Poly took a more active role in first defining Cal Poly education and culture then explaining to the freshmen. Not only did this allow Cal Poly to rewrite its culture (more on that later), but it was done so with the goal of each student succeeding. By giving them a chance to reflect on those aspects of their high school education, and then addressing how Cal Poly education is different, they helped the students open their minds to new ways and imagine more accurately what college life at Cal Poly would actually be like.

In addition to addressing individual departments and campus culture, WOW sought to inform students of the academic rigor and student resources at Cal Poly. WOW made students "aware of early attention to studies in Cal Poly's quarter system" and addressed the necessary

¹² James E. Curtis, "Orientation of New Students" Welcome Week Guide. California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo. N.d. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

¹³ Ibid.

qualities for students to succeed.¹⁴ WOW created a tool-box for new students to draw upon in deciding how to approach the classes and studying in the near future and following few years. The committee defined these tools as “purposefulness, initiative, decision, self-direction, responsibility, sociability and sensitivity to the environment.”¹⁵ These aspects are so important to learning in college and demonstrates that college does not coach you through everything. University President Julian A. McPhee reflected the same sentiment in his official welcome to students captured in the *El Mustang* student newspaper, as he emphasized “Initiative rests on the student” and welcomed students “to study, to campus activities, to hard work, to good times, and to lasting friendships. Be satisfied with nothing less.”¹⁶ It was important to the University that the arrival of women to campus in 1956 did not distract too much from the students’ studies. This was especially important as the administration was seriously considering growth. So, with pressure from University officials, WOW sought to make students more self-reliant and mature in their studies.

Students were not likely to achieve this maturity on their own, however. In addition to dorm managers, WOW counselors, and the *Mustang Handbook* (an informational book publicized as the “Bible” for student life at Poly that each freshman received), WOW promised to introduce new students to various student personnel services that helped them achieve this better balance. This included health, counseling, loans, scholarships, records, employment, housing, dining and extra-curricular activities. WOW specifically scheduled time and helped students take placement tests, register for classes, pay fees, and complete necessary medical

¹⁴ James E. Curtis, “Orientation of New Students” Welcome Week Guide, California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ McPhee, Julian A, “Officials Welcome, Offer Challenge to New Students” *El Mustang* (September 16, 1957)

exams. WOW addressed a very important aspect of student life by talking about students organizing time to achieve a better balance so they could succeed in college and beyond.

Create a Better Campus Culture

As previously mentioned, Cal Poly sought to separate itself from the culture of high school and instead encourage responsibility and maturity. Beyond this stated goal, I will argue that WOW wanted to create a stronger campus culture of school spirit, knowledge of campus history among students and to retain the culture of hootenannies and dances.

WOW served to create a stronger sense of school spirit by selling Cal Poly marked spirit wear and chaperoning new student participation in rallies and the big football game. WOW sold Cal Poly clothing during WOW and even required the students to buy rooter's caps to wear to the football game. WOW organized a big rally with the Pep Band in the gym and WOW clubs then continued to "rally on down" to the football field for the game.¹⁷ It is important to note that this excitement was not created from scratch, as the San Luis Obispo community had long been invested in Cal Poly athletics, as exhibited in the San Luis Obispo Telegram-Tribune newspaper.

The initial WOW committee knew this spirit had to be well-founded in a knowledge of "college history and its purpose in the higher education plans of California,"¹⁸ and worked effectively to make great Cal Poly representatives out of every freshman. In fact, throughout the week, every freshman completed a 50 question multiple choice and true/false test entirely on Cal Poly history and knowledge! The top two scorers received a prize, but this doesn't seem to be enough incentive, because when reflecting on the week and recording tips for the planning of the

¹⁷ "New Students Arrive on Campus For Welcome Week, Registration," *El Mustang* (September 16, 1957).

¹⁸ James E. Curtis, "Orientation of New Students" Welcome Week Guide. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

next Week, Herman Farlough advocated for still a greater emphasis on the customs and traditions of Cal Poly.¹⁹

In 1956, women students came back to campus for the first time in over 30 years. This fact makes orientation in 1957 even more important. In 1956, the addition of coeds were expected from students to bring “new and better standards of meal preparation and improve coarse language”. However, the students insisted in not changing the dress and agriculture culture of Levi’s jeans, spurs, acreage, and dancing.²⁰ Perhaps it was this certain amount of reluctance and uneasiness for women to come back to campus that made the Orientation committee feel it was important to unify the campus, address culture, and socialize the students while encouraging sensitivity to the social environment. The aforementioned “sociability and sensitivity to the environment” represented WOW’s attention to a pertinent campus issue and an attempt to unify the campus. In fact, 8 out of the 30 chairmen and advisors on the 1958 Week of Welcome Committee were women.²¹ This was a much higher representation than even “coeds” among the student population. The WOW committee seemed to respect these women as equal, and gave them important responsibilities. The Summary published recommendations from 5 WOW counselors, which made up more than a quarter of the recommendations they published.²² Women students coming back to campus was a turning point in Cal Poly history that WOW

¹⁹ Herman Farlough, “Welcome Week Report: On-Campus Committee 1957-1958,” California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Welcome Week Guide pg 33 Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

²⁰ “Coeducation time-turning event” *El Mustang* (September 18, 1956)

²¹ James E. Curtis, “Orientation of New Students” Welcome Week Guide. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

²² Herman Farlough, “Welcome Week Report: On-Campus Committee 1957-1958,” California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Welcome Week Guide pg 33 Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

responded to quickly in order to have a structured social education and reassure students of aspects staying the same.

Cal Poly retained important parts of previous orientation weeks and the general campus experience, including song fests, dances and hootenannies. “Freshman Follies,” as it was called in 1957, or “Poly Folly” in 1958 proved a very popular event during WOW and became a standing-room only event!²³ These events included the winning skits from the Camp Pine Crest portion of Orientation performed for the rest of the freshman class. The Polly Folly of 1958 generated so much excitement that the leaders threw together a spur of the moment dance lasting until midnight! ²⁴The dances in general, which have been included on every schedule I have seen, were very successful.²⁵ Another significant campus event was a “hootenanny” or song-fest with refreshments, usually held in the Temporary College Union. ²⁶ In fact, impromptu song-fests were known to break out at any time (often more than once) during the Week.²⁷ Hootenannies would have included school songs, which the freshmen already knew because they were taught during the Camp Pine Crest portion and printed in their Mustang Handbooks. These events would keep the excitement up and contribute to a general school spirit and unity.

These themes of school spirit and unity can be traced throughout the first two years of WOW, and no doubt contributed to the success of the program. Many individuals commented on

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Julie Pratt, “Welcome Week Report,” 26 Sept 1958, Welcome Week Guide: 1958 Summary and Recommendations, California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

²⁶ “New Students Arrive on Campus For Welcome Week, Registration” *El Mustang* (September 16, 1957).

²⁷ Herman Farlough, “Welcome Week Report: On-Campus Committee 1957-1958,” California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Welcome Week Guide pg 33 Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

the “big success”²⁸ of this “very valuable and worthwhile program...necessary...on Cal Poly’s Campus.”²⁹ One 1958 WOW leader even expressed that

the idea of group togetherness and campus indoctrination was perhaps the strongest of the Welcome Week program. In some places, however, it was a case of too much, too often, etc. There were so many things that we wanted to present to the new students that no one ever had a chance to catch their breath.³⁰

Little did Pratt know that these very factors would be the defining characteristics of Week of Welcome for years down the road. Not only were these factors important to WOW, but were crucial for the expansion of the University. University officials were very much planning for the expansion of Cal Poly. A positive appearance of the university was crucial for this, and in planning WOW, it was actually a concern that a negative approach to college life was relayed to the freshmen “sometimes given by a few upper classmen” if the new students were not isolated from campus. This explained the crucial presence of bussing students out to Camp Pine Crest, and the committee support for even holding future off-campus orientation at Asilomar in Pacific Grove, California. In a way, WOW could be seen as a whole university attempt to prevent this. Further, Pratt’s evaluation of WOW shows that perhaps this excitement and unity of the campus was not entirely organic. Her struggle as a leader in the early years is representative of a near

²⁸ Choin, Eugene. “Report of Welcome Week Activities for September 1958” Welcome Week Guide: 1958 Summary and Recommendations. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

²⁹ Farlough, Herman. “Welcome Week Report: On-Campus Committee 1957-1958.” California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Welcome Week Guide pg 33 Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

³⁰ Pratt, Julie. “Welcome Week Report” 26 Sept 1958. Welcome Week Guide: 1958 Summary and Recommendations. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

constant struggle of Cal Poly WOW to define how much hype is too much. In my experience with WOW, this is a problem that has not yet been resolved; and frankly, may never be resolved. WOW has become known for the high-energy, constant excitement that originated in the very beginning of the program. Today, WOW recognizes that this hype may not resonate with everyone and encourages leaders to plan some activities requiring less energy in order to better serve introverted students.

Even in the second year of its existence, the committee drew up a more rigorous application process for orientation leaders, to ensure they were getting the best students for the job. Additionally, members of the committee were scored on their performance, which initially reflects the success of the new program, but also the need for those involved to be the best, in order to put Poly in the best light. The focus on quality over quantity, has in some ways remained. WOW is now the largest volunteer college orientation program in the nation, which is a huge source of pride for the university. Despite the constant growth and less intense leader application process, WOW has maintained an aspect of quality by providing two leaders for a smaller group of “wowies,” as the new students are called today. This is definite progress from a ratio of one leader to 25 students, although it seems there was less participation in the late ‘50s than today.

Rally the Campus and Community

The final goal that I will argue WOW served at its inaugural year was to involve the campus and larger San Luis Obispo community. The official beginning of WOW redefined the scope and importance of orientation week at Cal Poly. Previously, orientation week at Poly had little known organization, goals, or faculty involvement. It was much simpler, but also only haphazardly informing college instructors of the activities, barely taking the extra step to invite

them.³¹ In planning the very first Week of Welcome, James C. Curtis was careful to note that “the scope of orientation is such that every member of the college staff must be considered important to its success.”³² There was also a sense that orientation begins with the student’s acceptance letter and continues throughout the first year.³³ In this way, Cal Poly is defining orientation closer to Hawkes and John’s wide definition.

As you can see, this is a huge difference in Cal Poly orientation activity and efficiency just between 1956 and 1957. In more concrete terms, we see this difference in faculty participation in first advising the students, holding department meetings and helping teach Cal Poly traditions, but also in participation in things like the Meet the Faculty Barbecue. This activity was very popular and became quite a tradition- and not just because of the legendary barbecue menu. Everyone connected to Cal Poly was invited to attend and *El Mustang* reported that this event was what made Cal Poly special.³⁴ This event fostered a feeling of community and unity between all Poly affiliated people that was especially noteworthy. In addition to the changes that came with organizing an official Week of Welcome program, Cal Poly was able to retain important campus traditions on a larger scale.

WOW further rallied the community by taking students off campus multiple times during the week. WOW included downtown tours by leaders, beach time (sometimes just specific WOW clubs, but also with everyone at the Avila Beach Party) and encouragement of local churches. WOW actively encouraged students to get involved at local churches in the community

³¹ Division Deans to All Instructors, Interdepartment Correspondence Sept 10, 1953. California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, WOW Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963).

³² James E Curtis, “Orientation of New Students” Welcome Week Guide, California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “New Students Meet Faculty at Barbecue” *El Mustang* (September 16, 1957).

by providing schedules and free transportation for the new students. Not only did the schedule block off Sunday morning for church service, but also Sunday night for church youth meetings.³⁵ Students were excited to get off campus and enjoy San Luis Obispo, much like today. Churches, therefore and other off-campus businesses were certainly excited to have the students back in San Luis Obispo.

WOW certainly helped rally the SLO community for the student's arrival and success, although this response was a bit delayed. The community was certainly proud of Cal Poly, and recognized the importance of the college to the town, and vice-versa. The community response, as I tracked by reading the Telegram-Tribune local newspaper, reliably welcomed students both years, but significantly stronger in 1958. The local support before seemed to be almost exclusively for athletics and trivial facts of growth, or return of students to campus, surface-level type of reports in 1957. 1958 brought deeper analysis of Cal Poly happenings and better, more specific ads. In 1958, the Tribune reported more athletic details, more details of a greater number of academic details, and interestingly, took a special interest in women. The community seemed to feel a certain responsibility to women, students or wives of students. The tribune published every meeting, informal coffee get-together, and in 1958 had an entire Women's page. Certainly the arrival of women on campus perhaps in combination with WOW taking them off-campus, brought a special kinship with the locals. For example,

The advertisements, which were of special interest to me were far better and more specific in 1958. The ads of 1958 targeted students, families, and staff of Cal Poly. The first advertisement to mention Welcome Week was Idler's Service and Appliances, titling a washer,

³⁵ James E. Curtis, "Orientation of New Students" Welcome Week Guide, California State Polytechnic College, San Luis Obispo, Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

freezer, and refrigerator advertisement with “Sensational Savings: Specials During Cal Poly Welcome Week”³⁶ This one in particular is ironic because freshman did not need to purchase appliances if they were living in the dorms. Another notable advertisement from Weishnar’s City Pharmacy welcomed the Cal Poly students, faculty and families and wishes them “a most successful year scholastically and athletically.”³⁷ The community had certainly recognized Poly’s achievements and growth as well as the general positive outcome it meant for the locals. There was immense pride for Cal Poly and excitement for students arriving every September, and I argue that this only increased with the coming of an official WOW. In fact, the WOW committee sent numerous thank you notes to various people and organizations for volunteering their resources, support and time. One of these included Hysen- Johnson Ford Incorporated on Monterey, which lent a station wagon to help pick up new students arriving on buses and trains.³⁸ So, WOW proved to be successful in drawing people and companies in to Cal Poly and uniting them in welcoming new students and encouraging their success.

To conclude, WOW began in 1958 to rally campus and community behind new student success and to create a better campus culture. The success of WOW at its very beginning, and today as the number 1 college orientation program in the nation, has not happened by accident.³⁹ Perhaps the only seemingly random aspect contributing to the program’s diamond success are the spouses, best friends, roommates, significant others, and Mustangs that WOW brings together in a masterful plan for time to be silly and time to be serious. WOW was, and

³⁶ “Idler’s Service and Appliances Ad” *The Telegram-Tribune*. San Luis Obispo (September 26, 1958).

³⁷ “Weishnar’s City Pharmacy Advertisement.” *The Telegram Tribune*. San Luis Obispo (September 26, 1958).

³⁸ Herman Farlough, “Summary of 1958 Welcome Week” Welcome Week Guide. California State Polytechnic College San Luis Obispo. Week of Welcome Box 1: 630.07 (1953-1963)

³⁹ Nate Acorn, “Off to the Best Start,” *Cal Poly Magazine*, September 2016.

continues to be, a valuable insight into student life, university priorities, and school spirit. WOW has reflected these aspects of the university while promoting traditions and general excitement for the whole campus and community.

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